

Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire
Wildlife Trust

The Rye Environmental Centre
High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT

NGR: SU 8740 9238

Planning Reference No. 00/06922/FUL

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December 2000

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SUMMARY

In December 2000, the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out a field evaluation at the Holywell Mead Swimming Pool Complex at The Rye, High Wycombe, on behalf of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust. The pool complex lies on the site of the Rye Roman villa, which has been excavated on several previous occasions. The evaluation showed that Roman walls and other deposits still survive, at least in places, at a depth of 0.9m beneath recent made ground.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work (Figs 1 and 2)

1.1.1 In December 2000, the OAU carried out a field evaluation within the grounds of Holywell Mead Swimming Pool Complex (NGR: SU 8740 9238) on behalf of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust in respect of a planning application (Planning Reference No. 00 / 06922 / FUL) to convert and extend an existing derelict building of the complex into an Environmental Education Centre. The work was carried out according to a brief set by, and a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) approved by, Buckinghamshire County Archaeological Service (BCAS). The site is located (Fig. 1) at The Rye, off Bassetsbury Lane, High Wycombe (NGR SU 8740 9238).

1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The site is situated on alluvium within the chalk valley of the River Wye at approximately 65 m OD. The evaluation was carried out within the complex on a paved terrace between the swimming pool plant room building to the east and the large swimming pool to the north (Fig. 2).

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The Rye Roman Villa has been subject to numerous excavations since the first discovery and excavation of a tessellated pavement in 1722-24 (Langley 1797). Further excavations were undertaken by Payne (1867) in 1862-3 and Colmer in 1932 (VCH Bucks 2). The most extensive excavations were undertaken by Hartley in 1954 in advance of construction of the swimming pool complex. This exposed the extent of the villa building, ancillary bath house buildings, an impressive gated entrance and boundary wall. The excavation results have been published (Hartley 1959) although the published plan contains little detail that can be used to accurately plot the precise villa location (Fig. 2).

1.3.2 The location of further ancillary buildings to the north-east of the main villa building has recently been suggested by the discovery of stacked tiles during the erection of a goalpost in 1995 (CAS 038005). In addition, a watching brief undertaken during refurbishment works to the swimming pool located numerous possible archaeological features (Parkhouse 1996). The precise interpretation of these deposits was limited by the restricted nature of the work and it remains possible that some of the deposits

encountered were related to the possible demolition and backfilling of the villa following the 1954 excavation.

- 1.3.3 The villa is not currently scheduled but has been identified as being potentially of national importance by English Heritage's Monuments Protection Programme.

2 EVALUATION AIMS

- 2.1.1 The aims of the evaluation, as set out in the Brief, were as follows:
- 2.1.2 To establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains within the proposal area.
- 2.1.3 To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains present.
- 2.1.4 To establish the ecofactual and environmental potential of archaeological deposits and features.
- 2.1.5 To establish whether, if located, buried remains associated with the villa will be affected by the proposed development.
- 2.1.6 To make available the results of the investigation.

3 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

3.1 Scope of fieldwork

- 3.1.1 The evaluation comprised of the excavation of two trial trenches *c* 3m x 3m square, within the footprint of the proposed extension. The trench locations selected, and agreed with BCAS, were in areas believed not to have been previously damaged by services.

3.2 Fieldwork methods and recording

- 3.2.1 Modern overburden deposits were machine excavated to the level of the first archaeological deposits or the level of natural geology depending upon which was encountered first. The trenches were cleaned by hand and any revealed features were sampled to determine their extent and nature, and to retrieve finds. The trenches and revealed features were planned at a scale of 1:20 and sample sections drawn at a scale of 1:20. All trenches and features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures laid down in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed D Wilkinson, 1992).
- 3.2.2 Although it was not possible to establish absolute spot heights above Ordnance Datum, heights relative to a fixed point within the pool complex were established and a consistent datum has been used on all section drawings (see Figs 4 and 5).

3.3 Finds

3.3.1 Finds were recovered by hand during the course of the evaluation and bagged by context.

3.4 Palaeo-environmental evidence

3.4.1 A single charcoal rich deposit was sampled for charred remains.

3.5 Presentation of results

3.5.1 The general results are followed by a description of individual trenches. This is followed by a brief description of the finds and a discussion of the results. A separate table detailing individual contexts is given in Appendix 1.

4 RESULTS: GENERAL

4.1 Soils and ground conditions

4.1.1 The site is located on Chalk overlain by natural sand and gravel, which was in turn overlain by at least 0.9m of made ground. Ground conditions were wet during the evaluation.

4.2 Distribution of archaeological deposits

4.2.1 No archaeological features were found in Trench 1. Trench 2 revealed a wall footing and floor make-up deposits, which are interpreted as forming part of the Rye Roman villa. These features had been exposed during previous excavations at the site; it is likely that associated deposits (floor surfaces etc) were largely removed during those excavations.

5 RESULTS: DESCRIPTIONS

5.1 Trench 1 (Fig. 4)

5.1.1 Trench 1 was situated in the southern half of the terrace and measured 3 m by 3 m square. The trench was reduced in size to 2 m wide by 2.5 m long to avoid the main outflow water pipelines for both swimming pools.

5.1.2 The underlying natural gravel (13) was encountered at a depth of 1.38 m below present ground level (paving stones). This was overlain by a silty clay and gravel deposit (12), 0.22 m thick, and a sandy silt and gravel deposit (11), 0.1 m thick. The origin of these deposits is unclear although they are probably of alluvial origin. A final layer (10) of crushed concrete and flint, 0.8 m deep, overlay (11) and was in turn sealed by reinforced concrete which was then overlain by the present paving stones. No artefacts were recovered from these deposits.

5.2 Trench 2 (Figs 3, 4 & 5)

- 5.2.1 Trench 2 was situated in the northern half of the terrace and measured 3 m by 3 m square. The trench was reduced to 2.5 m by 2.5 m wide after encountering the inflow water pipeline to the swimming pool.
- 5.2.2 The earliest feature identified, at a depth 0.88m below the present ground surface, was a wall (24), aligned roughly east to west, 0.84m wide and extending beyond the trench edges to east and west. This was constructed using large flint nodules (0.1 m to 0.3 m diameter) and mortar. Abutting Wall (24) were two probable floor make-up deposits, (41) to the north and (32) to the south, of rough mortar construction.
- 5.2.3 On the south side of Wall (24), Layer (32) was truncated by what appeared to be a shallow pit (21), 0.5 m wide by 0.2 m deep. This was filled by a silty clay deposit (22), 0.02 m thick, which was overlain by charcoal rich deposit (23). A tessera and five fragments of roof tile were recovered from Fill (23). A soil sample taken from this deposit proved to contain a very mixed assemblage of seeds, leaves and molluscs of recent origin (see Section 5.4 below). Layer (32) was overlain by a Layer (33), 0.02 m thick, and probably also of recent origin.
- 5.2.4 On the north side of Wall (24), Deposit (41) was truncated by a possible rectangular feature (29), seen in plan in the north-eastern corner of the trench, and measuring over 0.1 m wide by 0.62 m long. It contained a mixed silty clay deposit (30) with inclusions of chalk, flint and two fragments of ceramic building material (CBM). The similarity to Feature (21), both in the nature of the fills and in stratigraphic position, strongly suggests a recent origin for this feature. Deposit (30) was overlain by Deposit (38), which abutted Wall (24).
- 5.2.5 These deposits were overlain by a series of silty clay and gravel tipped deposits (34), (42), (43) and (39), seen on the western side of Trench 2, and probably representing backfill from the 1954 excavation. Layer (39) contained three fragments of Roman tile. These were sealed by Deposits (40), (35), (36), (37) and (20), a series of silt, sand, gravel and concrete rubble deposits, probably associated with the construction of the terrace. Layer (40) contained a fragment of Roman tile.
- 5.2.6 Deposits (35) and (37) were overlain by a crushed concrete and flint makeup layer (20) measuring 0.68 m deep through out Trench 2. Deposit (20) was cut to the south by a modern pipe trench (27), aligned east to west, measuring over 0.4 m wide by 0.8 m deep, and containing the inflow water pipeline for the swimming pool, and back filled with deposit (28). A north west to south east service trench (25) also cut (20) to the east, and contained electric cables and was back filled with deposit (26). All deposits were then sealed by 0.1 m thick reinforced concrete, leveled with 0.02 m of fine sand and covered with paving stones.

5.3 Finds

- 5.3.1 One pila and one tegula were recovered from Deposit (36), one tessera from Deposit (30), three tile fragments from Deposit (39), one tile fragment from Deposit (40) and

one tessera and five tile fragments from Deposit (22). All of the finds date to the Roman period, but are otherwise undiagnostic of date.

5.4 Environmental sample results

- 5.4.1 A soil sample was taken from Fill (23) and processed for charred plant remains. The processed flot was scanned by Dr Mark Robinson of Oxford University Museum. It contained a mixed assemblage of uncharred seeds of recent origin. It also contained molluscs, including species not present in this country until the medieval period.

6 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

6.1 Reliability of field investigation

- 6.1.1 The evaluation revealed modern made ground (10), relating to the construction of the swimming pool complex, at the southern end of the terrace in Trench 1. It overlay two gravelly layers (11 and 12), which could be of alluvial origin. Modern service trenches, containing water pipelines and electric cables, found in both trenches do not appear to have an impact below the depth of made ground. The construction of the swimming pool and plant room building must have had a severe impact on the survival of the Roman villa.
- 6.1.2 Trench 2 has shown that archaeological deposits do survive in the area of the terrace, at a depth of c 0.9m below the modern ground surface.
- 6.1.3 The presence of seeds and molluscs of recent origin within a cut feature indicates that all of the deposits overlying Wall (24) and mortar layers (32) and (41) are likely to be of recent, 20th Century, origin.

6.2 Interpretation

- 6.2.1 The 1954 excavation plan of the Roman Villa was not accurately located and as a result the location of the present trial trenches in relation to the villa buildings is somewhat uncertain (see Fig. 2). However, the suggested location is unlikely to be grossly inaccurate.
- 6.2.2 The published account of the excavation of the ground floor of the Roman Villa in 1954 describes the villa house as a double-corridor type containing three large rooms at each wing. Trench 2 is likely to be located within the southern wing of the house. The three large rooms of the southern wing were described as the living-rooms of the house (Hartley, 228-230). The eastern room of which was later modified into a heated room through the insertion of a hypocaust. This was accomplished by dividing the room into three smaller compartments via an east-west and north-south internal wall. The northern compartment became the stoking room and both north and south compartments contained a rough mortar floor (Hartley, 231). The mortar layers and the east-west wall identified in Trench 2 appear to correspond with the description of the south eastern room after modification.

- 6.2.3 The absence of any archaeological features or deposits in Trench 1 suggests that it lies outside the main villa buildings - the trench was excavated well below the depth at which archaeological remains survived in Trench 2. It is possible that archaeological features could survive in the vicinity of Trench 1, cut into the top of the possible alluvial layer (11). Although Hartley recorded few features outside of the main villa buildings, this may simply reflect the approach adopted during the earlier excavation. However, a number of post-medieval ditches were recorded by Hartley and it is possible that Trench 1 lies entirely within one of these features.
- 6.2.4 Following a request from BCAS, an attempt was made to examine the 1954 excavation archive in an effort to establish how the villa was excavated and whether, for example, 'islands' of undisturbed stratigraphy could survive. Unfortunately, following inquiries at the relevant museums in High Wycombe and more generally in Buckinghamshire, it has proved impossible to locate the archive. However, Hartley's report states that 'the floors of the house had all been uncovered by previous excavators' (Hartley 1959, 231) and also indicates that the surviving floors were removed over large areas in order to look for earlier occupation. It is therefore, unlikely that such 'islands' survive.

7 APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Ctxt No</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Width (m)</i>	<i>Depth (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Finds</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Date</i>
1								
	10	Deposit	>3 x 3	0.8	Makeup deposit	-	-	-
	11	Deposit	>3 x 3	0.1	Layer	-	-	-
	12	Deposit	>3 x 3	0.22	Layer	-	-	-
	13	Deposit	>3 x 3	-	Gravel natural	-	-	-
2								
	20	Deposit	>3 x 3	0.6	Makeup deposit			
	21	Cut	0.5	0.2	Modern feature			
	22	Fill	0.5	0.02	Fill of feature			
	23	Fill	0.5	0.16	Fill of feature	Tessera Tile	1 5	Roman
	24	Structure	0.8 x 2.2	-	East-West wall			
	25	Cut	1.2	0.72	Service trench			
	26	Fill	1.2	0.72	Trench fill			
	27	Cut	>0.4	0.8	Service trench			
	28	Fill	>0.4	0.8	Trench fill			
	29	Cut	0.6 x 0.1	-	Unknown feature			
	30	Fill	0.6 x 0.1	-	Fill of feature	Tessera	1	Roman
	31	Void	Void	Void	Void	Void	Void	Void
	32	Deposit	2.5 x 0.9	>0.1	Mortar layer			
	33	Deposit	1.8	0.02	Layer			
	34	Deposit	1.7	0.18	Tipped deposit			
	35	Deposit	2.6	0.2	Makeup deposit			
	36	Deposit	1.2	0.2	Makeup deposit	Pila Tegula	1 1	Roman
	37	Deposit	>2.5	0.08	Trample deposit			
	38	Deposit	>3 x 3	0.02	Layer			
	39	Deposit	0.5	0.02	Tipped deposit	Tile	3	Roman
	40	Deposit	>3 x 3	0.16	Layer	Tile	1	Roman
	41	Deposit	2 x 1.4	0.1	Mortar layer			
	42	Deposit	0.8	0.06	Tipped deposit			
	43	Deposit	1.6	0.18	Tipped deposit			

8 APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

- Hartley, B.R. 1959 'A Roman Villa at High Wycombe' in Records of Bucks 16, p227-257
Head, J.F. 1955 Early Man in Bucks, p37,81,156,157
Langley, T. 1797 History and Antiquities of the Hundred of Desborough, p29
Parker, J. 1878 Early History and Antiquities of Wycombe, p1-3
Parkhouse, J. 1996 An Archaeological Watching Brief at Holywell Mead, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire. unpublished client report
Payne, E.J. 1867 'Roman Villa at Wycombe' in Records of Bucks 3, p160-4
VCH Bucks 2 p17-18
Wilkinson, D 1992 Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual

9 APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Rye Environmental Centre, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire

Site code: HWRYE 00

Grid reference: NGR: SU 8740 9238

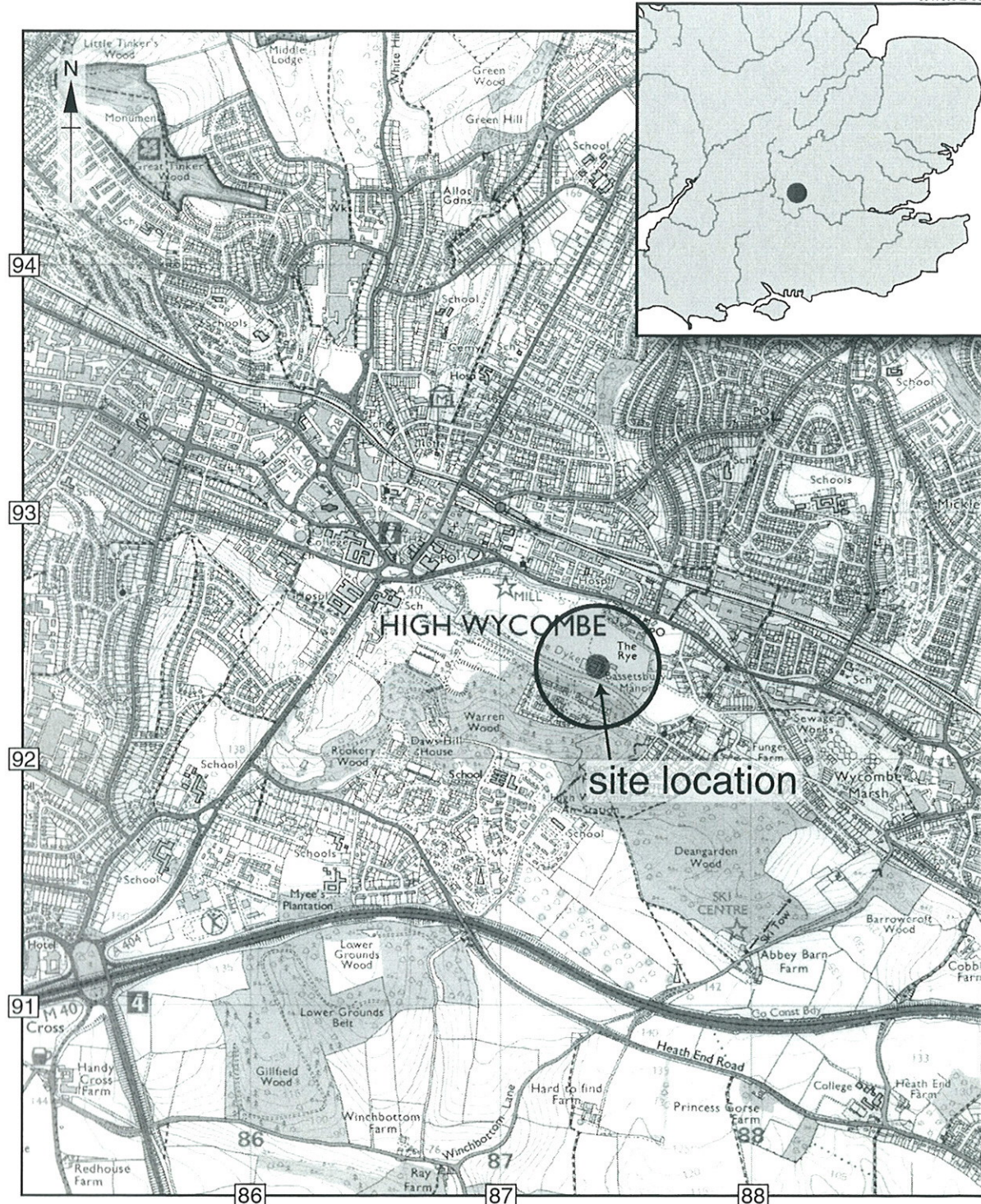
Type of evaluation: Two 3 x 3 m trenches

Date and duration of project: 4 - 6 December 2000

Area of site: 0.5 hectare

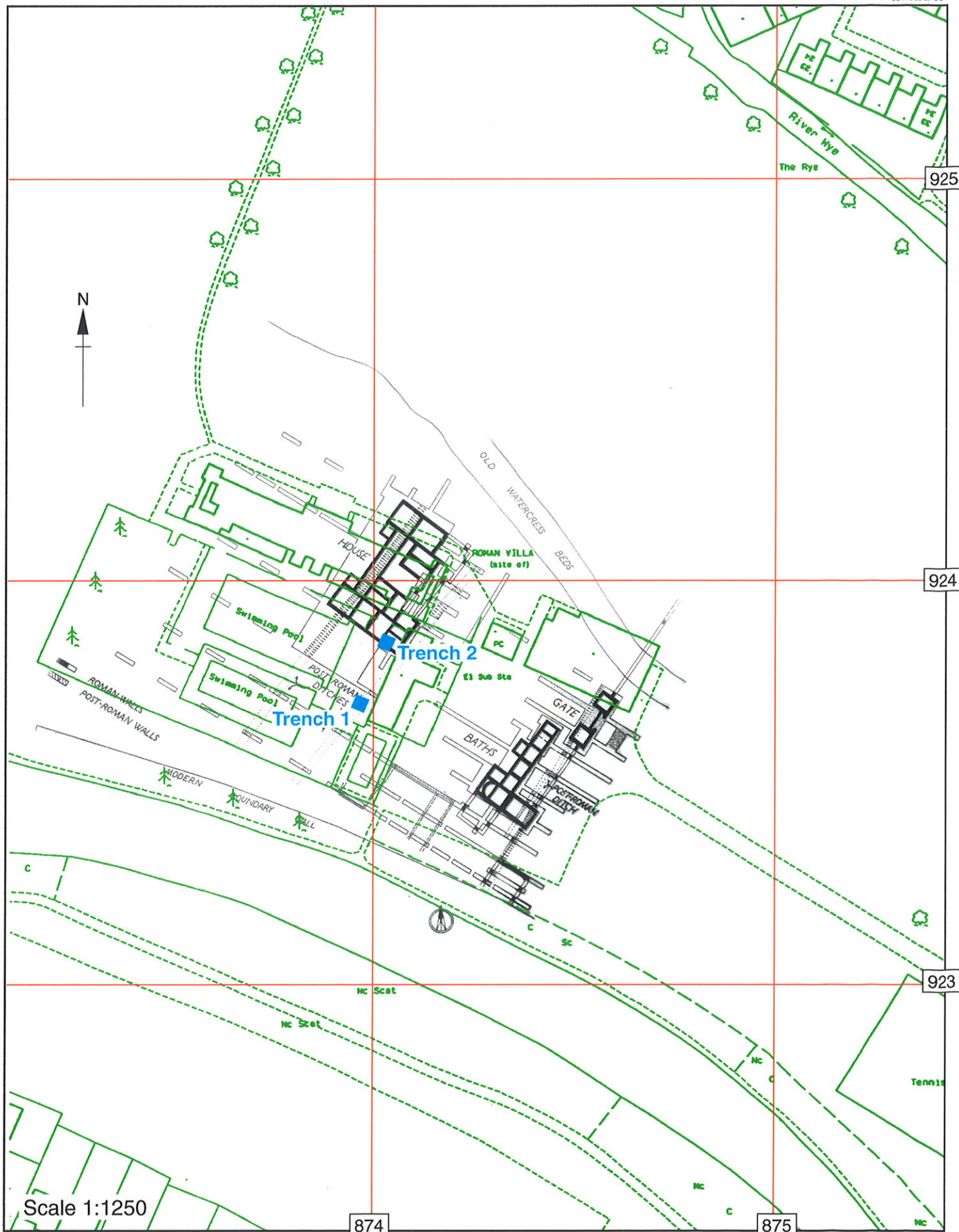
Summary of results: Two internal floor make-up layers abutting east-west dividing wall of Rye Roman Villa

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OAU, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with an appropriate museum



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Figure 1: Site location



■ Trial pit locations

▨ Plan of villa buildings and other features from 1954 excavations

Figure 2: Location of villa and trenches



Figure 3: Plan of Trench 2

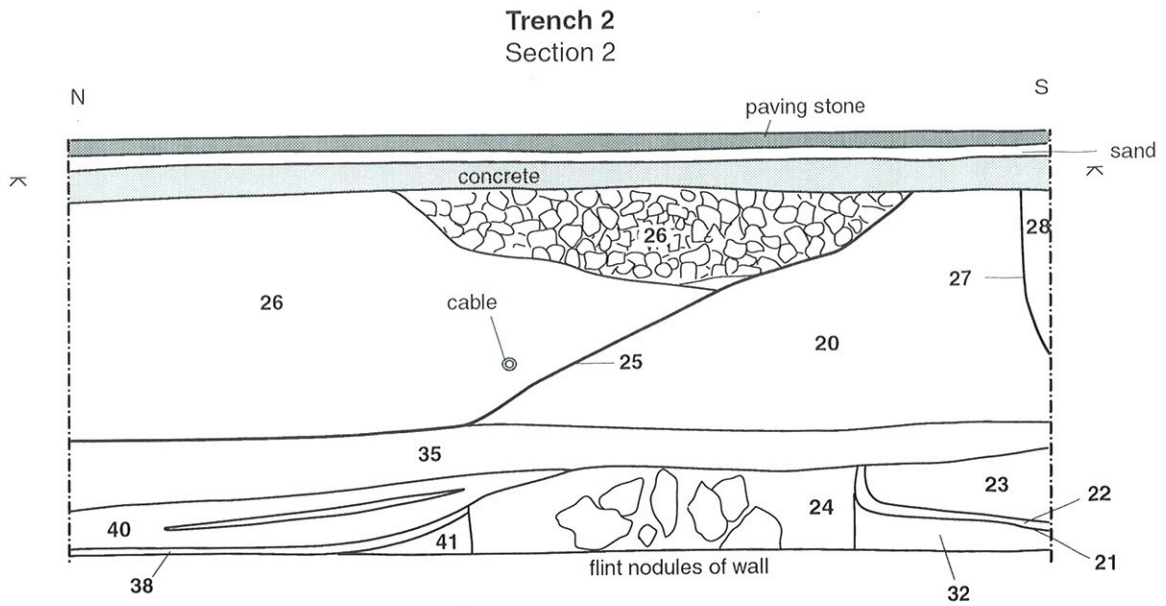
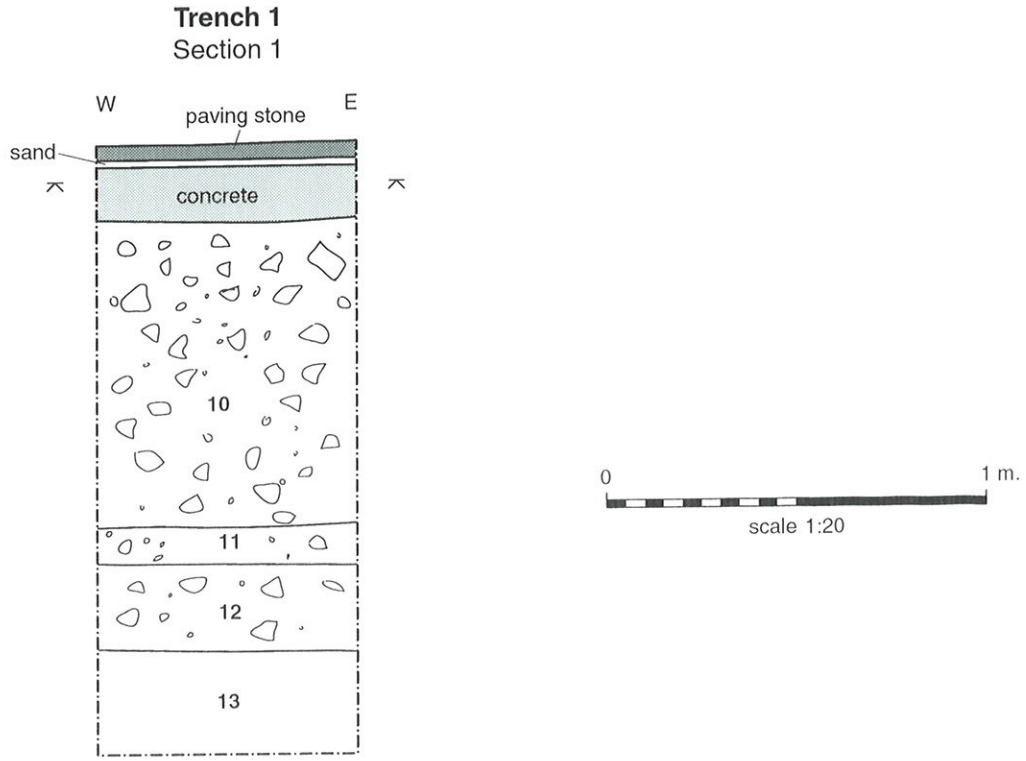
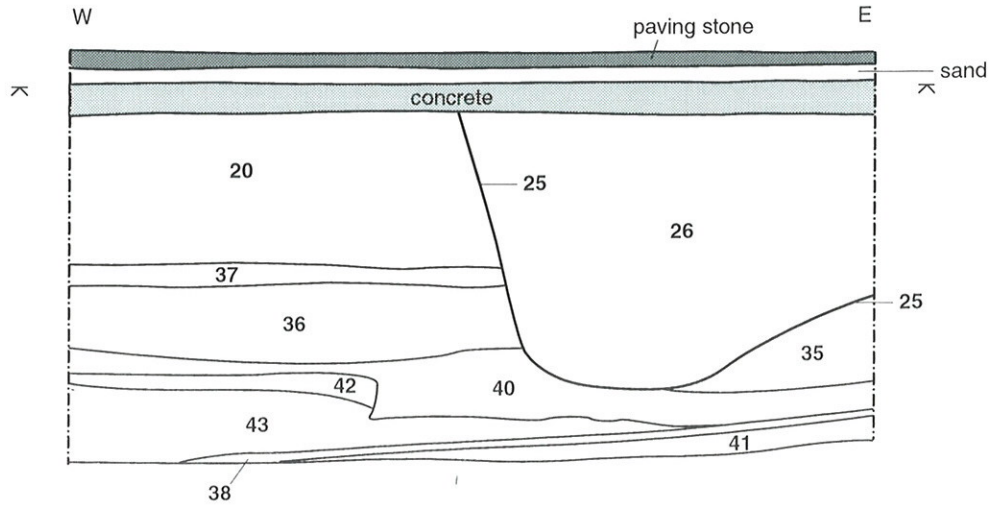
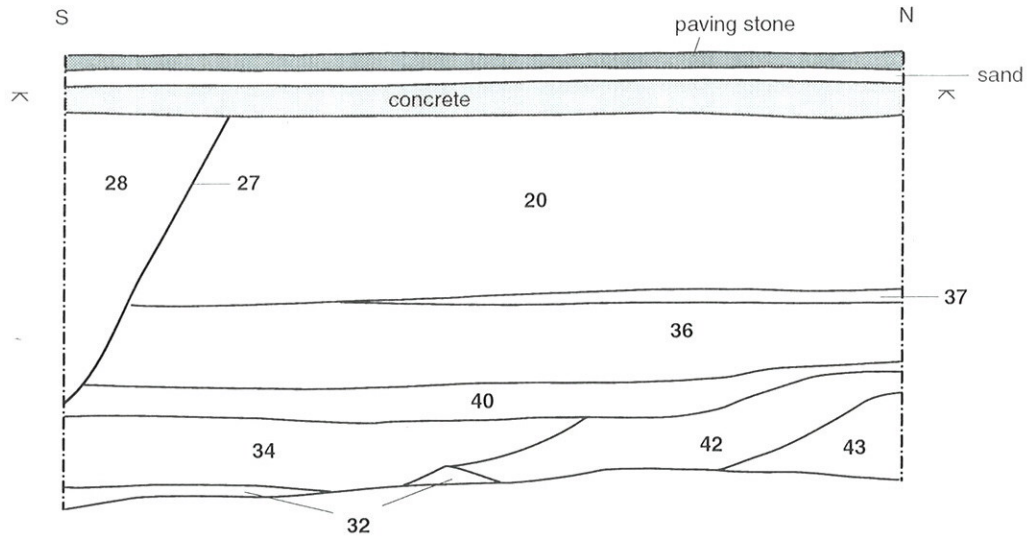


Figure 4: Sections 1 and 2

Section 3



Section 4



Section 5

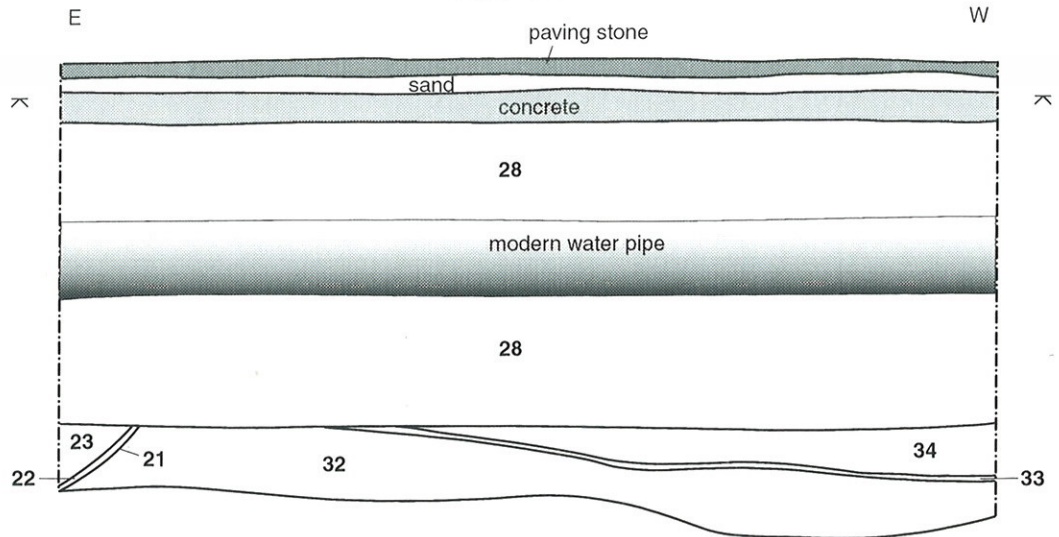


Figure 5: Sections 3, 4 and 5



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